

Combining Mojave Viper and Desert Talon

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## **Introduction**

"The MEF [Marine Expeditionary Force] had been honed by our predecessors to be the most efficient killing machine on the battlefield. With integrated ground, air, and logistics elements under a single commander, the force generated a level of speed and momentum that only the enemy could appreciate fully."<sup>1</sup> General James Conway made this statement about the MAGTF he commanded, the I Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) I.

Each generation of Marines must ensure the next generation is prepared for future operations. The current Pre-deployment Training Program (PTP) exercises address the guidelines and requirements for Block IV training but do not adequately prepare the MAGTF to conduct operations across the spectrum of conflict. The PTP needs to focus on combined arms capability, which begins by training as a MAGTF, as well as maintain and exercise the lessons learned during OIF and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) fighting a counterinsurgency. The Marine Corps needs to shift focus onto the next fight to ensure success in future conflicts. Mojave Viper and Desert Talon, the culminating PTP exercises, must be integrated to reverse the erosion of combined arms proficiency that makes the MAGTF a uniquely lethal force.

## **The Problem**

The operation of any combined arms force requires a certain level of trust, developed during extensive training, between all elements of the MAGTF. The fundamentals that create this trust within a MAGTF are slowly being eroded by training as separate elements of the MAGTF. According to Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, "[MAGTF] commanders should establish habitual relationships between supported and supporting units to develop operational familiarity between those units."<sup>2</sup> These habitual relationships are the cornerstone to building trust within a MAGTF and are built on the bonds developed during common entry-level training for both officer and enlisted. Conducting two separate exercises does not allow for the socialization process that begins at Officer Candidate School (OCS), The Basic School (TBS), and recruit training to continue during training to employ the MAGTF.<sup>3</sup> Training together develops the generational familiarity and experience throughout each level of responsibility in the MAGTF, from the newest Marine in the operating forces to the highest levels of command. This common experience is essential to building habitual relationships that last, not just for specific MAGTFs, but across the employment of any MAGTF. Trust and success are also built on anticipating the actions of the supported or supporting unit and are direct results of the common training and

background. The detailed planning and integration that develops from face-to-face coordination during training translates into trust in combat when face-to-face coordination is not always possible.

The trust built during the repetitive execution of combined arms warfare conducted throughout training also contributes to the lethality of the MAGTF. Maintaining the combined arms skill set is essential to complying with the Commandant's initial guidance to remain "always ready - and always capable of forcible entry."<sup>4</sup> The primary mission of the current PTP is to prepare Marines to deploy in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, both Mojave Viper and Desert Talon primarily focus on OIF and OEF skill sets.<sup>5</sup> One of the elements of Mojave Viper's charter is to "maintain the core competency as a combined-arms force,"<sup>6</sup> and Desert Talon provides the opportunity for aircrew to conduct "integrated combat missions and operations," according to the 2<sup>d</sup> Marine Aircraft Wing Letter of Instruction (LOI).<sup>7</sup> This incorporation of some combined arms training is a result of the lessons learned from OIF II PTP during which many attending commanders identified the "lack of high intensity, Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) combined arms operations."<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the belief was that the singular focus on OIF specific skill sets would lead to the atrophy of combined arms ability. However, the introduction of

some combined arms training does not replace the actual requirement to train together as a MAGTF to maintain proficiency in the fundamentals of combined arms warfare. In fact the intangibles gained from training together as a MAGTF have afforded the Marine Corps success in the past.

### **The Solution**

The goal of the traditional combined arms exercise (CAX) conducted by the Marine Corps prior to the current PTP was, according to Majors Miller and Ray, "the integration of combined arms with maneuver ... to develop a rapid, efficient, and effective combined arms immediate action response in concert with maneuver."<sup>9</sup> As imperfect as it may have been, CAX addressed training to the high end of the spectrum. However, a return to an old-style CAX, where the hard earned lessons of conducting counterinsurgency warfare or low-intensity conflict might be overshadowed, is not the solution either. Many of the commanders participating in the PTP lessons learned discussion following OIF II stated that "to train for high-intensity operations, operate at low-intensity, and then transition back to high-intensity is advantageous over training for low-intensity and transition to high."<sup>10</sup> This statement was a correlation to the high-intensity combat operations required during operations in Fallujah after months of counterinsurgency operations. However,

PTP change does not equate to training only for high-intensity combat as MCDP 1 states, "a modern military force capable of waging a war against a large conventional force may find itself ill-prepared for a "small" war against a lightly equipped guerilla force."<sup>11</sup>

The key to developing a PTP that ensures the MAGTF is the premier unit of choice during the Long War is to strike the balance of training across the spectrum of conflict. The Marine Corps needs to reverse the degradation of its combined arms capability to ensure it is capable of exploiting the advantage when high-intensity combined arms warfare is required. The Marine Corps must also remain vigilant in training to fight a counterinsurgency to ensure success in the current fight and against future low intensity threats. The bottom line is that training for low-intensity conflict, using the current PTP exercises to focus on basic unit level skills, will not prepare the MAGTF for high intensity conflict. No more so than high-intensity CAX prepared the MAGTF for the counterinsurgency fight. Ideally the Marine Corps would transition to a more balanced PTP exercise, covering the entire spectrum of conflict that included all elements of the MAGTF.

The first step is to collocate the two separate exercises. The challenges in logistics and manpower can be overcome first before altering the actual exercises. Then the

implementation of a new PTP exercise can be accomplished incrementally, but moving both Mojave Viper and Desert Talon to the same site should be the first step to reestablish the habitual relationships and operational familiarity. The integration of Desert Talon and Mojave Viper training events would be the next step. This integration would ensure the proper focus is on winning the current fight and begin laying the ground work for future combined arms training. Until the operational commitment overseas is reduced, the complete integration will be difficult. The number of aviation units participating in the semi-annual Desert Talon does not easily overlap with the number of Ground Combat Element (GCE) units that go through Mojave Viper. Until the ability is developed to push multiple GCE units through a single exercise window the Aviation Combat Element (ACE) will have to support combined arms training requirements for the GCE with available squadron assets or detachments. For example, spreading ACE units over two additional PTP exercises and doubling the number of GCE units supported at each event will decrease the gap between the number of supported and supporting units. Any excess GCE units could still be supported by available ACE elements conducting Block V refinement.

Once pre-deployment training cycles have been synchronized between the ACE and GCE, the focus should turn to improving the



PTP exercises to incorporate combined arms training. As the requirement for troops in OIF and OEF draws down, the time required to refocus Marine Corps training on maintaining a balanced and capable force will become available. The solution would be a PTP exercise that focuses on the basic unit skills building to more complex combined arms events culminating in a MAGTF-wide event followed by counterinsurgency operations. A simulated transition during the PTP exercise from low-intensity to high-intensity and then back to low-intensity mimics the potential future operating environment. The PTP exercises should also be scalable to service any size MAGTF. This would require the training organization to be robust enough to provide training to larger MAGTFs or have SOPs built to integrate augments from outside units. The exercise should be flexible enough to change periods of instruction or events to focus on any lessons learned or tactics, techniques, and procedures from the current conflict. Preparing the Marine Corps for any future conflict will require a flexible and scalable PTP exercise.

### **Counterarguments**

Some may argue that the current deployment cycle does not allow for the drastic alteration of PTP exercises, but in an age of potentially constant conflict the Marine Corps cannot afford to wait until the next operational pause. Transitioning the

Marine Corps' PTP to include an integrated combined arms exercise will be difficult. The current generation owes a timely transition in training to the next generation to ensure the Marine Corps remains a preeminent fighting force. Planning for the next PTP exercise should not remain reactionary. The Marine Corps needs to anticipate the future requirements to focus their training across the spectrum of conflict and ensure all elements of the MAGTF conduct, at a minimum, a portion of their training together.

Some may argue that a combined arms exercise does not meet the needs of the current operating forces. In order to maintain an ability to conduct forcible entry, the Marine Corps needs to focus training across the spectrum of conflict. The key to the Marine Corps' future success is to implement the lessons learned from OIF and OEF and regain the ability to conduct effective combined arms warfare. The current fight must be won while transitioning to prepare for the next.

## **Conclusion**

The Marine Corps takes pride in the idiom "Train like you fight," but by living up to this phrase, the current PTP is eroding the combined arms capability the MAGTF has always sought to maintain. Separate training exercises for the ACE and the GCE prevent the development of habitual relationships and the

application of face-to-face coordination and detailed planning. These fundamentals developed during combined training provide the foundation of trust that the high-intensity MAGTF combined arms capability requires to operate effectively and lethally. If the Marine Corps continues to train separately and not focus training across the spectrum of conflict, then the MAGTF will eventually be indistinguishable from any other land force augmented by aviation and logistical support.

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## Notes

1. Lieutenant General James Conway, "'Farther and Faster' in Iraq", *United States Naval Institute, Proceedings*, 131, no. 1 (2005): 48.
2. United States Marine Corps, *MCDP-1 Warfighting*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1997), 55.
3. United States Marine Corps, *MCDP-1 Warfighting*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1997), 59.
4. General James Conway, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, 27 November 2006, <<http://www.marines.mil/hqmc/cmc/Documents/Forms/By%20Type.aspx>> (21 October 2008), 4.
5. OIF/OEF Pre-deployment Training Continuum, 17 March 2006, <[https://www.mfp.usmc.mil/TeamApp/G3/Topics/20051012101714/OIF-OEF PREDEPLOYMENT TRAINING CONTINUUM.htm](https://www.mfp.usmc.mil/TeamApp/G3/Topics/20051012101714/OIF-OEF_PREDEPLOYMENT_TRAINING_CONTINUUM.htm)> (21 October 2008), 5.
6. Optimized 080308 Command Brief, 08 March 2008, <<https://intranet.mciwest.usmc.mil/palms/TTECG/3shop/SharedDocuments/Forms/AllItems.aspx>> (15 October 2008), 6.
7. 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, Letter of Instruction (LOI) for Exercise Desert Talon 1-09, 2008, 3.
8. Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, *OIF-II Pre-deployment Training Program (PTP)*, 2005, 5.
9. Majs Mark A. Miller and Eddie S. Ray, "Understanding CAX," *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 1995, 50.
10. Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, *OIF-II Pre-deployment Training Program (PTP)*, 19
11. United States Marine Corps, *MCDP-1 Warfighting*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1997), 27.

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